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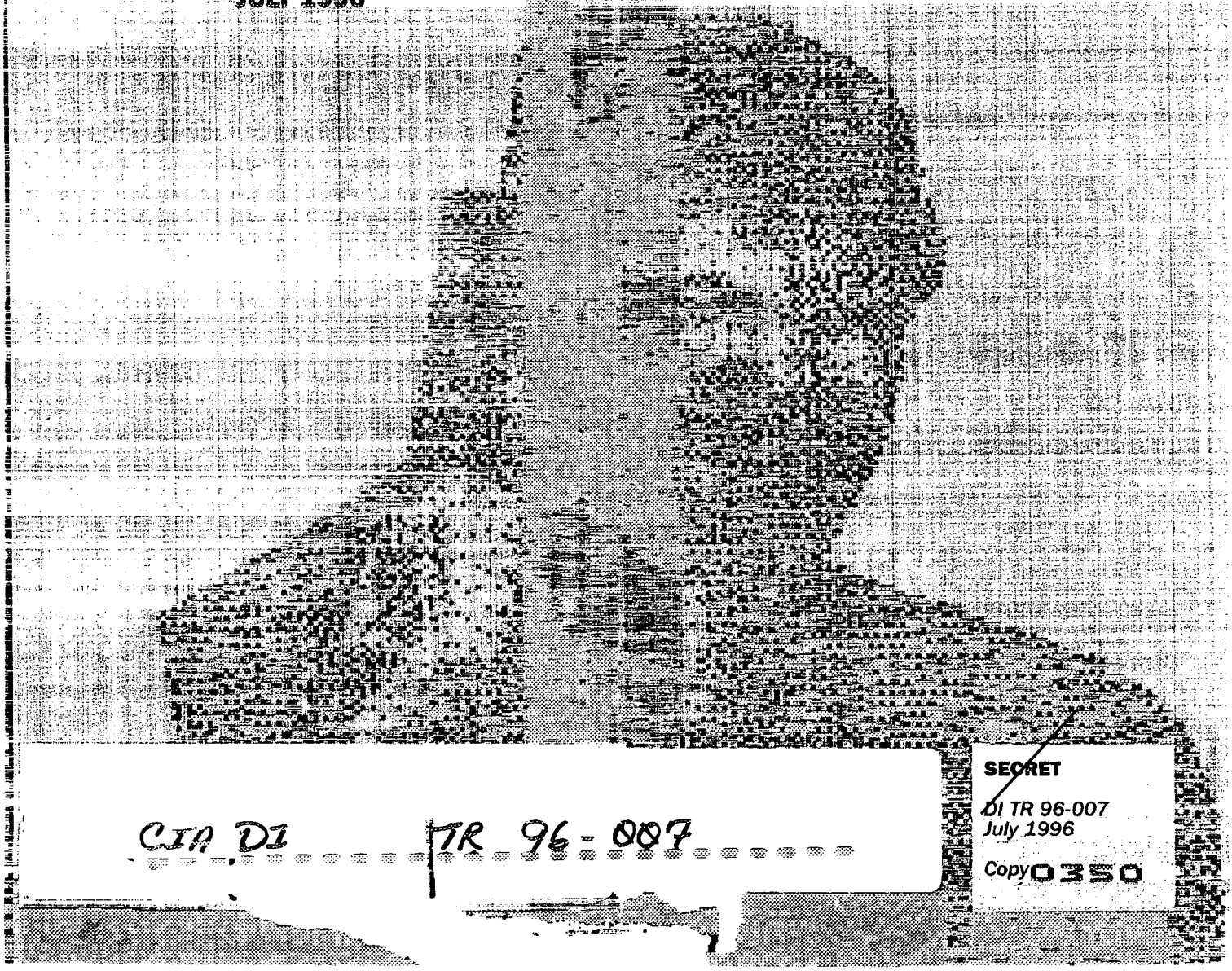
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

DCI Counterterrorist Center CTC Central Intelligence Agency

COUNTERTERRORIST CENTER

# TERRORISM REVIEW

JULY 1996



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The 25 June truck bomb attack at Khubar Towers, Dhahran, appears to have been well planned and executed. The Saudi investigation apparently is focusing on a group led by a Saudi Shia resident in Lebanon, but some reports point to Saudi Sunni militants or Iran as credible culprits. In spite of increased security measures and heightened threat awareness among the US military and civilian populations in Saudi Arabia, they will remain attractive targets. (b)(3)

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*This review is published monthly by the DCI Counterterrorist Center. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Executive Editor on* [redacted] (b)(3)

*Information available as of 17 July 1996 was used in this Review.* [redacted] (b)(3)



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# Khubar Bombing: Saudi Oppositionists and Iran Major Suspects (b)(3)

**The 25 June truck bomb attack at Khubar Towers, Dhahran, which resulted in the death of 19 US citizens and the wounding of approximately 500 US and foreign nationals, appears to have been well planned and executed. The Saudi investigation seems to be focused on a group led by a Saudi Shia resident in Lebanon named Ahmad Mughassil. Other reports point to Saudi Sunni militants—primarily renegade Saudi terrorist financier Usama Bin Ladin—but also implicates the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR), a London-based Saudi dissident organization. Iran is another credible culprit, having been noted collecting intelligence recently on US facilities and suspected by Riyadh of having assisted Saudi Shia under investigation in the bombing.** (b)(3)

**In spite of increased security measures and heightened threat awareness among the US military and civilian populations in Saudi Arabia, they will remain attractive targets for terrorists. The groups who claimed credit for the Khubar and Riyadh bombings have threatened further attacks, and the perpetrators have demonstrated a capability to strike even relatively secure facilities.**

## A Well-Executed Attack

The exceptionally powerful explosion outside the security fence of the Khubar Barracks destroyed the facade and the lower floors of one building and damaged other buildings within a 5-km radius. Based on the size of the crater—approximately 26 meters wide and 11 meters deep—the Federal Bureau of Investigation believes that this may be the largest explosion their investigators have ever encountered. The Khubar facility housed most of the approximately 2,500 US forces, as well as 170 French and 310 British servicemen, responsible for monitoring the no-fly zone over southern Iraq.

This well-executed attack may have been planned for several months. Personnel at the Khubar facility had reported numerous incidents over the past eight months—the latest on 24 June—of surveillance and harassment by young Arab males. These incidents appear to have been efforts to test the facility's defenses and the guards' reaction times:

- The events included firing shots, crashing the perimeter fence, and taking photos, as well as other forms of surveillance. The hostile actions occurred between 2000 and 2400 local time.
- Security at the facility already had been heightened following the 13 November 1995 bombing of the US Office of the Program Manager, Saudi Arabian National Guard (OPM/SANG) building in Riyadh, and US military personnel reported that Saudi police planned to take further steps as a result of these recent incidents. (b)(3)

## Possible Suspects (b)(3)

***Saudi Shia.*** We have no definitive information indicating who was responsible for the bombing, although the Saudi-led investigation is focusing on a Saudi Shia, Ahmad Mughassil, a.k.a. Abu Ishaq, living in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. The Saudis say they have obtained information from interrogations of individuals they have arrested—both before and after the bombing—that links Mughassil to a shipment of explosives from Lebanon to Saudi Arabia seized in March 1995, and possibly to the OPM/SANG bombing: (b)(3)

- The Saudis believe that Mughassil directed the explosives smuggling operation, that he possesses a Lebanese passport and perhaps an Iranian one, and that he may take directions from Iran. The Saudis at first thought Mughassil had fled to Iran but received subsequent information that he was still in Syria.
- Riyadh has been seeking Syrian assistance in extraditing Mughassil from Lebanon since at least early April for questioning about the shipment of explosives to the kingdom. They have redoubled their efforts since the Khubar bombing. (b)(3)



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***Not Ruling Out Iraq***

*Although we have no reporting linking Iraq to Khubar, the bombing coincided with the third anniversary of the US attack on the Iraqi Intelligence Service Headquarters:*[a]

- *Iraqi officials have explicitly threatened retaliation for the US strike, and repeated those threats on the second anniversary of the strike.*
- *The US servicemen serving with Joint Task Force/ South West Asia, who are tasked with enforcing the UN-mandated no-fly zone in southern Iraq, are a logical target for Iraqi retaliation*

[a] *The attack on Iraq's IS headquarters occurred before dawn on 26 June 1993. Although the Khubar bombing was on the evening of 25 June, the sun had already set, signifying the beginning of the next Islamic day.*

Because we have no independent information on Mughassil, we cannot corroborate that he or his compatriots carried out the Khubar bombing. The Saudis have not shown US officials their evidence in the Khubar bombing nor have they provided many details on the investigation. Indeed, when they do provide information, much of it is dated and often contradicts earlier reporting.

***Saudi Sunni.*** Another body of information points to Saudi Sunni as possible culprits, primarily noted Saudi renegade and terrorist financier Usama Bin Ladin. Saudi security officials have told us that their investigators are looking into Bin Ladin's possible complicity in the bombing. Bin Ladin has several cells in Saudi Arabia. (b)(1) (b)(3) (b)(3)

Other information links the London-based Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR) more directly to both the Khubar attack and the Riyadh bombing:

- On 26 June an unidentified Arab man phoned the al-Arab newspaper in London claiming responsibility for the Khubar attack on behalf of the "Legion of the Martyr Abdallah al-Hudaif." The caller also claimed responsibility for the bombing in Riyadh and promised further terrorist acts unless the Saudi Government expelled US and other foreign troops. Abdallah al-Hudaif was a CDLR supporter who was executed in August 1995 for throwing acid on a Saudi officer. Saudi security forces claim that CDLR leaders ordered al-Hudaif's actions against Saudi officials: (b)(3)
- Following Abdallah al-Hudaif's execution, the CDLR called al-Hudaif the first martyr "in the five-year struggle for legitimate rights in Saudi Arabia" and said that the killing "marks a dangerously momentous turn in the struggle between the regime and the reform movement . . . the consequences will be extremely disadvantageous." (b)(3)
- In mid-March 1996, during an acrimonious public debate between CDLR leader Masari and his deputy, Sa'd al-Faqih, Faqih accused Masari of supporting a secret military wing of the CDLR, headed by a Shia, which he said was responsible for the bombing in Riyadh. (b)(3) (b)(3)

***Iran.*** Iran's vociferous denunciation of the US military presence in the region, coupled with its demonstrated preparedness to use terrorism as a policy tool, raises a possibility of Tehran being behind the Khubar bombing. Information compiled from various sources since the spring of 1995 indicates increased Iranian surveillance and collection of targeting information on US personnel and installations worldwide, particularly in the Middle East. Although Iran may have developed a program in Saudi Arabia designed to threaten US interests, we cannot link any known Iranian operation to the Khubar bombing. (b)(3) (b)(3)

The Iranians may be connected, however, to Saudi Shia under suspicion in the Khubar investigation. Saudi officials believe that Mughassil has strong family ties to Lebanese Hizballah and has been in contact with the office of Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei. A Jordanian service reports that an alleged Hizballah leader named Ahmad Ali Zayb Zahir—whom we have not been able to identify—stated on 26 June that the bombing was carried out by Saudi Shias with links to



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***Domestic Political Concerns Hampering Investigation Cooperation*** (b)(3)

*The bombing in Dhahran occurred at a time when domestic political considerations increasingly are battering the Saudi Government and exposing its vulnerabilities. Sensitive to the appearance of ceding responsibility for the investigation to Washington and wary of possible leaks by US investigators, some Saudi leaders have been reluctant to share information connected to the blast in an attempt to limit negative domestic political repercussions. In addition, Saudi officials appear to view the blast largely as an internal Saudi matter and therefore balk at passing information to US counterparts out of concern that such action would infringe on Riyadh's sovereignty:*

(b)(1) (b)(3)

- *the Saudi Interior Minister intends to restrict information on the bombing investigation from US authorities—especially the FBI—because he wants the Saudis to get full credit for the eventual capture of the culprits and because he wants to limit US access to junior Saudi officers who may divulge more details than authorized.* (b)(3)

*Riyadh's close relationship with the United States and the presence of US forces in the kingdom, which regime opponents have criticized repeatedly since the Gulf war, have become a stinging political liability in recent months.* (b)(1) (b)(3) *Saudi public dissatisfaction with the United States has intensified sharply since April because of what many perceive as Washington's lack of reaction to Israel's campaign in Lebanon in April, as well as US support for the newly elected Netanyahu government:*

- *in May that his countrymen regularly demanded his explanation of what Riyadh is doing to confront Washington regarding its policies in the region.* (b)(1) (b)(3)

- *Attempting to stoke this sentiment, CDLR leader Masari repeatedly has called the US presence in Saudi Arabia "illegitimate" and has warned that attacks against US troops in the kingdom will continue.* (b)(3)

*Recognizing these political sensitivities, Riyadh has sought both to mask information that the blast was directed at US troops and to minimize its impact. The government-controlled Saudi press only listed US citizens among the many nationalities who suffered,* (b)(1) (b)(3) *and neither Crown Prince Abdallah nor Minister of Defense and Aviation Sultan—the country's two most senior leaders after the King—have visited the bombing site.* (b)(1) (b)(3) *If, as now seems probable, information suggesting that the homegrown opposition is more organized and sophisticated than Riyadh previously realized, Saudi officials will seek to avoid public exposure of this knowledge.*

(b)(3)

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Hizballah and Iran. We have previous reporting of Iranian support to Saudi Shia:

- There are indications that the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Lebanon contingent gave unspecified training in 1995 to Shia oppositionists from Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

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- , in the summer of 1993, the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps held a two-month-long military training course for 16 Saudi Shia in a Hizballah camp in Lebanon.

**Further Terrorist Attacks Likely** (b)(3)

Threats and other statements directed against the US presence in Saudi Arabia, some made by suspects in the Khubar bombing, underscore the significant danger of further terrorism against US interests in the kingdom:

- US civilians in the Dhahran area—including US employees of ARAMCO and McDonnell Douglas—have reported receiving telephone threats since the attack.

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- CDLR leader Masari said on 4 July that "if there are enough attacks or if US civilians start to arrive home in body bags, the United States will have to weigh up its presence in Saudi Arabia."

- Bin Ladin told a British newspaper that attacks on US personnel in Saudi Arabia were the "beginning of war between Muslims and the United States," and advised France and the United Kingdom also to withdraw troops stationed there. He also claimed that Muslim religious leaders have given him a *fatwa* (religious authorization) to "drive out the Americans."

(b)(3)

US facilities and personnel in Saudi Arabia are likely to remain attractive targets. For all of the major suspects in the bombing, attacks against US interests in the kingdom have the added benefit of undermining the credibility of the Saudi regime. The Khubar bombing demonstrates that anti-US terrorists can strike even relatively secure facilities in the kingdom. In addition to the roughly 6,000 military personnel in Saudi Arabia, there are more than 40,000 US civilians who would also present tempting—and easier—targets.

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